

Block

# 4

## **American Poetry: An Introduction**

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### **Block Introduction**

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#### **UNIT 1**

**Ralph Waldo Emerson: Brahma, Hamatreya**

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#### **UNIT 2**

**Walt Whitman: 'O Captain, My Captain' &  
'Passage to India' (lines 1–68)**

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#### **UNIT 3**

**Emily Dickinson: Because I Could Not Stop for Death,  
A Thought Went Up My Mind Today,  
Death Sets a Thing Significant**

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#### **UNIT 4**

**Alexie Sherman Alexie 'Crow Testament' & 'Evolution'**

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## CORE COURSE (BEGC-105): AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Welcome to CORE COURSE BEGC-105: AMERICAN LITERATURE.

**This Course aims at giving you a complete orientation and understanding into the diverse genres and dimensions of American literature. In the first block which is dedicated to Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, we discuss with you American Drama: An Introduction in Unit 1. *All My Sons* is based upon a true story, which was pointed out in an Ohio newspaper. The news story described how in 1941–43 the Wright Aeronautical Corporation based in Ohio had conspired with army inspection officers to approve defective aircraft engines destined for military use** Unit 2 takes up *All My Sons* for a detailed Study so that you are exposed to all the critical interpretations. Unit 3 discusses thematic Concerns in *All My Sons* followed by a comprehensive discussion on the aspects of Characterisation in the last unit of the block.

In the next block (2), we take up an equally important and interesting text *The Scarlet Letter* is a work of **historical fiction** by author Nathaniel Hawthorne, published in 1850. Set in Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony, the novel tells the story of Hester Prynne who conceives a daughter through an affair and is forced to wear the scarlet letter. *The Scarlet Letter* was one of the first mass-produced books in America and is considered a classic work today. In Unit 1, A Socio Cultural Background of the novel *The Scarlet Letter* is taken up. The art of Characterization as displayed by the novelist is discussed in Unit 2. Unit 3 deals with all the diverse Themes and Their Expression through Imagery as found in the novel. Unit 4 discusses other important issues and aspects such as Structure, Narrative Style and Special Features

**Block 3 of this course is dedicated to Short Fiction and you will find it very appealing and interesting.** Unit 1 offers you a detailed introduction of Short Fiction. Unit 2 gives you a complete view of O' Henry's *After Twenty Years*. Unit 3 which is centered on Willa Cather's *On the Gull's Road* is good to bring out complex issues. Unit 4 brings out all important themes in Ernst Hemingway's *Snows of Kilimanjaro/ Killers*.

**Block 4 is designed and developed in such a way that you are able to understand the complete essence of American Poetry.** Unit 1 takes up the poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson: *Brahma, Hamatreya*. Unit 2 takes into account the diverse themes and issues in Walt Whitman's 'O Captain, My Captain' & 'Passage to India' (lines 1–68). Unit 3 explores the poetry of Emily Dickinson with special reference to poems such as *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, *A Thought Went Up My Mind Today* and *Death Sets a Thing Significant*. Unit 4 deals with the imaginative side of Alexie Sherman Alexie as demonstrated in the poems such as 'Crow Testament' & 'Evolution'.

Have a great time reading the Course.

## **Block 4: Introduction**

**Block 4 is designed and developed in such a way that you are able to understand the complete essence of American Poetry.**

Unit 1 takes up the poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Brahma, Hamatreya.

Unit 2 takes into account the diverse themes and issues in Walt Whitman's 'O Captain, My Captain' & 'Passage to India' (lines 1–68).

Unit 3 explores the poetry of Emily Dickinson with special reference to poems such as Because I Could Not Stop for Death, A Thought Went up My Mind Today and Death Sets a Thing Significant.

Unit 4 deals with the imaginative side of Alexie Sherman Alexie as demonstrated in the poems such as 'Crow Testament' & 'Evolution'.

Have a great time studying.



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# UNIT 1 RALPH WALDO EMERSON

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this Unit we shall discuss the following two poems of Emerson:

- 'Brahma'
- 'Hamatreya'

After reading this Unit, you should be able to interpret the prescribed poems of Emerson in terms of Indian thought.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Ralph Waldo Emerson was deeply interested in Indian philosophical concepts such as 'Brahman', 'Atman', 'Parmatman', 'Maya', 'Karma' and 'Punarjanma'. Poems and essays such as 'Brahma', 'Hamatreya', 'Maya', 'Illusions', 'Representative Men', 'The Over-soul', 'Poetry and Imagination', 'Greatness', 'Inspiration' and his Journal are permeated with the aroma of Indian thought.

About the impact of Indian thought on Emerson, Mahatma Gandhi-an admirer of Emerson-wrote as follows: "The essays to my mind contain the teaching of Indian wisdom in a western guru. It is interesting to see our own thus differently fashioned." (Quoted in Frederick I Carpenter; 'American Transcendentalism in India', Emerson Society Quarterly, II Quarter, 1963, p. 59)

In the following sections, we shall analyse the two poems of Emerson: 'Brahma' and 'Hamatreya'

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## 1.2 EMERSON (1803-1882)

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Ralph Waldo Emerson-the author of the two poems prescribed for your study-was born in 1803 in the USA. As a voracious reader, Emerson read the following on Indian thought: Sir William Jones's 'Hymn to Narayana', The ordinances of Manu. and fragmentary, translations of the Vedas and the Upanishads found in his Works, Sir Charles Wilkins's The Bhagavad Gita; Horace Hayman Wilson's The Vishnu Purana; Henry Thomas Colebrook's Essays on the Vedas; Eugene Bournant's ' BhagavatPurana, and Rammohan Roy's Several Principal Books.



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### 1.3 'BRAHMA'

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If the red slayer thinks he slays  
or if the slain thinks he is slain  
They know not well the subtle ways  
I keep, and pass, and turn again (4)

Far or forgot to me is near  
Shadow and sunlight are the same;  
The vanquished gods to me appear  
And one to me are shame and fame (8)

They reckon ill who leave me out  
When me they fly, I am the wings;  
I am the doubter and the doubt,  
And I the hymn, the Brahmin sings. (12)

The strong gods pine for my abode  
And pine in chair the sacred seven  
But thou, meek lover of the good!  
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven. (16)

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### 1.3.1 Outline of the Poem

#### Stanza 1

If the blood-stained killer thinks that he has killed someone, he is wrong and if his victim thinks that he has been killed, he is equally wrong. They do not know the mysterious ways of Brahma, the Paramatman. It is he who lives, he who dies, and he who is born again. It is he who is both the creator and the destroyer. He is the real doer of all things.

Brahma is timeless and spaceless. Therefore distance does not matter to Brahma. Things past and forgotten are to him as near as things that are present. To him shadow and sunlight are the same. To him the vanquished gods appear to be present and to him fame and shame are the same.

They are wrong who believe that they can ignore Brahma or escape from him. When they fly away from him, then Brahma himself is the wings that carry them away. Brahma himself is both the doubter and the doubt. Brahma himself is also the hymn that the Brahmin sings.

Even the strong gods yearn to go to the abode of Brahma. The seven sages (Sapta Rishis) also try in vain to attain his abode. But the humble lover of Dharma finds Brahma and turns his back on heaven.

#### 1.3.2 Appreciation

'Brahma' is one of the popular poems of Emerson. A discerning reader of this poem can easily see the influence of Indian thought on the author. According to ancient Indian thought, there is one Supreme Power that governs and guides the whole universe. This Supreme Power is the origin of all beings and the final destination of all souls (atmas). Through a ceaseless cycle of births and deaths, through nobility of actions and purity of heart, through purgation of base passions, the soul (atma) finally merges with Brahman (Paramatman) or Over-soul (to use Emerson's term).

As we mentioned above, Emerson's knowledge of Hindu thought helped him in writing this poem. In fact, the following sloka of **The Bhagavad Gita** was the inspiration for Emerson's poem 'Brahma'.

"Yaenamvethihantaram  
Yatacainamhanyatehatam  
Ubhau tau navijanito  
na yam hantinahanyate"

(2, 19)

(He who thinks that he slays and he who thinks that he is slain, both of them fail to perceive the truth; he neither slays nor is slain. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 2nd ed. (1970; rpt., Bombay: Blackie & Son (India) Ltd. 1975 p. 107)

Let us now attempt an analysis of Emerson's poem 'Brahma'.

Brahma or Over-soul has no beginning, no middle, and no end. It has ever been there. It can neither be created nor destroyed. Slayer, slaying, and slain are not real; they are only appearances. For, the soul cannot be killed nor can the soul kill. So if one thinks he is the killer, or if another thinks he has been killed, both are ignorant of the ways of Brahma. The soul lives on; only the body dies.

Brahma or Over-soul is beyond time and space. Distance does not matter to the over-soul. Nothing is forgotten because everything is present to Brahma, Shadow and sunlight are the same to the Supreme God nor does he make a distinction between fame and



shame. Brahma is both the doubter and the doubt. He is the hymn as well as the object of the hymn.

Even, the gods pine for the abode of Brahma. The Sapta Rishis try in vain to reach His abode. But the lover of Dharma finds Him and turns his back on heaven.

'Brahma' is a lyric of four stanzas and each stanza is of four lines. It has a regular rhyme-pattern; the language used is simple and lucid-though the thought involved is subtle and difficult to comprehend.

### 1.3.3 Poetic Devices

- i). "You must have observed that 'Brahma' is a lyric of four stanzas and that each stanza has four lines. In other words, 'Brahma' contains four quatrains. (Aquatrain is a verse of poetry that has four lines.)
- ii). Pairs of opposites like 'shadow and sunlight', 'shame and fame'. 'far and near' are used to indicate that 'Brahma' (over-soul) transcends these states or qualities.
- iii). In the second stanza 'alliteration' is used. For example: Far-Forgot; shadow and sunlight; doubter-doubt. In the same stanza, 'consonance' is used. For example: shame-fame.

(You know that 'alliteration' is the repetition of speech sounds in a sequence of stressed syllables and consonance is the repetition of a sequence of consonants with a change in the intervening stressed vowel.)

iv) In 16 lines (i.e. 4 stanzas), the rhyme pattern followed is: ab; cd; ef; gh. But in the last stanza, the words 'abode' and 'good' do not rhyme together well.

v) 'Inversion' is used in the following lines: "The vanished gods to me appear" (instead of appear to me) and "when me they fly" (instead of "when they fly to)

vi) In Section 16.4, we have mentioned that a particular sloka of the **Bhagavad Gita** inspired Emerson to write 'Brahma'. The sloka is given in Sec. 19.3.2.

Read out the sloka and observe the rhythm. Then you read out the first stanza of 'Brahma' and observe the rhythm. By now you must have noticed that the sloka of **The Bhagavad Gita** and the first stanza of 'Brahma' follow the same rhythm.

Moreover, in the first stanza, the exigencies of 'consonance' (regarding the words 'slayer', 'or') demanded the poet to use 'or' instead of 'and'. But the use of 'or' makes the word 'they' in the next line ungrammatical.

### Self-check Exercise 1

Answer the following questions

1) Write the outline of the poem. (75 words)

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2) Interpret the "Brahma" in terms of Indian thought. (200 words)

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3) Write a short note on the poetic devices used in "Brahma" (100 words)

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### 1.4 'HAMATREYA'

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Bulkeley, Hunt, Wilard, Hosner, Merian, Flint,  
Possessed the land rendered to their toil  
Hay, Corn, roots, hemp, flax, apples, wool, and wood  
Each of these landlords walked amidst his form  
Saying "T is mind, my children's, and my name's  
How sweet the west wind sounds in my own tree!  
How graceful climb those shadows on my hill!  
I fancy these pure waters and the flags  
Know me, as does my dog; we sympathize;  
And, I affirm, my actions smack of the soil."  
Where are these men? Asleep beneath their grounds:  
And strangers, fond as they, their furrones plough.  
Earth laughs in flowers, to see her boastful boys  
Earth-proud, proud of the earth which is not theirs;  
Who steer the plough, but cannot steer thin feet  
Clear of the grave.

They added ridge to valley, brook to pond  
And signed for all that bounded their domain;  
This suits me for a pasture; that's my park;  
We must have clay, lime, gravel, granite-ledge,  
And misty low land, where to go for peat.  
The land is well-lies fairly to the south  
'T is good, when you have crossed the sea and back  
To find the sitfast acres where you left them";  
Ah! the hot owner sees not Death, who adds  
Him to his land, a lump of mould the more  
Hear what the Earth says :

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#### Earth-song

Mine and yours  
Mine, not yours

Earth endures;  
Stars abide-  
Shine down in the old sea;  
Old are the shares;  
But where are old men?  
I who have seen much  
Such have I never seen  
The lawyer's deed  
Ran sure in tail  
To them and to their heirs  
Who shall succeed  
Without fail  
Forever more  
Here is the land  
Shaggy with wood;  
With its old valley;  
Mound and flood  
But the heritors?  
Fled like the flood's foam  
The lawyer and the laws  
And the Kingdom  
Clean swept here from  
They called me theirs  
Who so controlled me  
Yet everyone  
Wished to stay, and is gone,  
How am I theirs  
If they cannot hold me  
But I hold them?  
When I heard the Earth-Song  
I was no longer brave  
My avarice cooled  
Like lost in the chill of the grave

#### 1.4.1 The Outline

Bulkeley, Hunt, Willard, Hosmer, Meriam, Flint were some of the earliest settlers in Massachusetts. They produced hay, corn, roots, hemp, flax, apples, wool and wood in their land. Each of them who owned the land walked amidst his farm saying: "This land is mine and my progeny's. How sweet the west wind appears as it passes through my trees: How gracefully the shadows climb on my hill. I feel as if these springs of pure water and the flags (a kind of plant) know me as intimately as does my dog. We sympathize with each other; and my actions have a flavour of the soil."

But where are all these owners now, asks the poet. They are all dead and buried in their own grounds. Now new settlers-who are as foolish as their forerunners- plough the same lands with the same sense of possession.

Earth laughs-in the form of blooming flowers-at the boastful cultivators, who are proud of possessing the earth-which cannot be theirs forever. They steer the plough in the fields but cannot keep away from the grave.



While ploughing the fields they connect a ridge with a valley, a brook with a pond and aspire to bring under their possession the lands which they do not possess now. They say to themselves: "This piece of land will suit me for a pasture; and I can use that piece of land as a park. We must have clay, lime, gravel, and granite. We also need misty lowlands for growing peat. This piece of land is good; it lies to the south. It will give us satisfaction, if on our return from across the seas. We find our lands in the condition of which in left them." Alas! The foolish owners of the land do not know that Death will turn them into some mounds on the earth.

Now earth speaks: "Stars shine forever; and the shores of the seas are also old. But where are the old men now. Of course, the lawyers' deeds pass from one generation of inheritors to another generation. Inheritors change, but the land remains there, covered with woods, valleys, mounds, and rivers. But the inheritors, lawyers, and laws have all gone floating like foam on the stream of water.

These men called me (i.e. the earth) theirs and believed that they possessed me. But they-who wanted to stay on forever-have all gone. How can I be theirs if they cannot possess me. In fact, it is I who possesses them; for, after death they become a part of me.

After listening to Earth-Song, the poet's avarice disappeared.

#### 1.4.2 Appreciation

'Hamatreya' was published in 1847. 'Hamatreya' is a variation of the term 'Hail Maitreya', which means 'Hail, Mother Earth!' The poem deals with the theme of the transient life of man and the permanence of Earth.

However, RemingerVaid gives a different interpretation. Referring to an entry in Emerson's Journal in 1845, the critic says: "Emerson had copied into his 1845 Journal a long passage from the **Vishnu Purana, Book IV**. It reads in part: 'Kings, who with perishable frames have possessed this ever-enduring world and who, blinded with deceptive notions of individual occupation, have indulged the feeling that suggests,'This earth is mine-it is my son's it belongs to my dynasty'-- have all passed way ... Earth laughs as if smiling with autumnal flowers to behold her kings unable to affectthe subjugation of themselves' ... The passage includes a Song of the Earth, recited to a disciple named Maitreya of which the name 'Hamatreya' is a variation. The passage concludes: 'These were the verses, Maitreya, which Earth recited and by listening to which ambition fades away like snow before the wind'. This makes Hamatreya the name of a disciple and the lines, "Hear what the Earth says which precede the Song of the Earth are addressed by the Guru (in VishnuPurana) to his disciple."

Keeping in mind the critic's words, we shall take a look at the poem again and interpret it:

'**Hamatreya**' tells us about the mortality of man. No man can live or return his possessions forever. The early settlers of Massachusetts walked proudly declaring that some particular plot of land belonged to them. They are dead and buried and are possessed by the land of which they considered themselves to be the proud owners.

These early settlers were followed by others. The newcomers told the line of their forerunners in increasing their possessions. They too-like their forerunners-did not see Death lurking at the corner. The earth laughs at them and says that they could not possess her forever, but she possessed them as they became a part of her.

This exquisite lyric contrasts the short, transient life of men with the permanence of Earth or Nature. Like the earlier poem, 'Brahma', this lyric also brings out the Indian influence on Emerson. The language used in this poem is simple and musical.

### 1.4.3 Poetic Devices in 'Hamatreya'

Now we shall discuss the poetic devices in 'Hamatreya':

i) 'Hamatreya' can be considered a good example of free verse: It has irregular line lengths; it lacks regular stress patterns and rhyme.

ii) There are three speakers in the poem:

- a) The landowners
- b) The Earth
- c) The Poet

The language used is indicative of the personality of the speaker:

a) The flat and unpoetic language of the landowners reflects their mundane and materialistic approach towards life. Hence even in the use of proper names in line (1) **and** in the list of items grown on the soil (in line 3), Emerson, deliberately, didn't infuse a pattern.

b) In contrast to the landowners 'flat language, the language of the earth is poetic. You can find various poetic devices in the language used by the earth.

For example, 'alliteration' is present in the following lines:

"... boastful boys  
"Stars abide  
Shine down in the old sea  
Old are the shores'  
"I who have seen much  
such have I never seen"  
"Fled like the flood's foam  
The lawyer and the laws"

Moreover, 'Rhyme' can be seen in the following lines:

"Mine and Yours  
Mine, not Yours  
Earth endures" (28-30)

And 'Rhetoric' can be found in the following lines:

"But where are old men?" (34)

"But the inheritors?" (48)

"But I hold them?" (59)

c) The language of the poet as one who understands the transient nature of human life after listening to the song of earth-is also poetic. For example:

"When I heard the Earth-song  
I was no longer brave  
My avarice cooled  
Like lost in the chill of the gram"

(Note the use of simile and the rhyme in the above passage.)





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## UNIT 2 WALT WHITMAN - 'O Captain, My Captain' & Passage to India' (Lines 1-68)

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading the unit, you should be able to analyse critically the following poem of Whitman:

'Passage to India' and  
'O Captain! My Captain!'

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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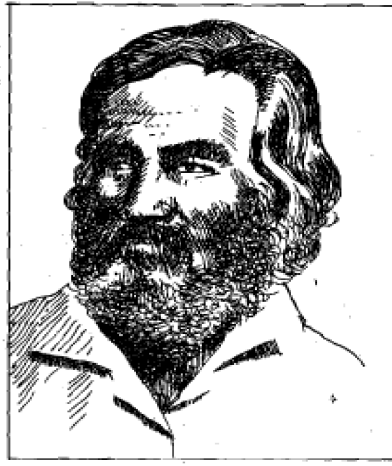
In the previous Unit, we discussed two poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson. We shall discuss in this Unit two poems by another American poet called **Walt Whitman** who was a contemporary of Emerson. We shall, in the following sections, study and analyse the poems "Passage to India" and "O Captain! My Captain!" by Whitman.

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### 2.2 WHITMAN (1819-1892)

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As a journalist, Whitman worked on various newspapers such as 'The Long Islander', 'The New York Aurora' and 'The Brooklyn Evening Star'. In 1855 he published the first edition of his magnum opus, *Leaves of Grass*. Being a prolific writer, he produced many poems till his death in 1892.

On reading the first edition of the **Leaves of Grass** written by Whitman, Thoreau-his contemporary writer and a friend of Emerson-commented that the book was 'wonderfully like the Orientals'. Emerson found in it 'a mixture of the **Bhagavad Gita** of the Hindus and the New York Herald. Sir Edwin Arnold and Roma in Rolland perceived the Indian parallels in Whitman. Swami Vivekananda read and re-read the 'Song of Myself and concluded that Whitman was a great Sanyasin. Rabindranath Tagore declared "no American has caught the oriental spirit so well as Whitman." SarvepalliRadhakrishnan, in his **Eastern Religions and Western Thought**, wrote: "Whitman turns to the East in his anxiety to escape from the complexities of civilisation and the bewilderment of a baffled intellectualism"?

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### 2.3 'PASSAGE TO INDIA'

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Singing my days  
Singing the great achievements of the present  
Singing the strong light works of engineers  
Our modern wonders, (the antique pondous seven out vied)

In the old world, the east, the Suez Canal  
The New by its mighty railroad spann'd  
The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires;  
Yet first to sound, and ever sound, the cry with  
thee O soul,

The Past!.the past! the past!  
The Past-the dark unfathom'd retrospect!  
The teeming gulf-the sleepers and the shadows!  
The past-the infinite greatness of the part!

For what is the present after all but a growth  
out of the past?  
(As a projectile form'd, impell'd, passing a certain line, still keeps on,  
So the present, utterly form'd, impell'd by the past.)

Passage **O** Soul to India!

Eclaircise the myths Asiatic, the primitive fabler,  
Not you alone proud truth of the world  
Nor you alone Ye facts of modern science,  
But myths and fables of old, Asia's, Africa's fabler,  
The fardarting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams  
The deep diving bibles and legends;  
The during plots of the poets, the elder religions,  
O You temples faires than lilies pour'd over by the  
rising sun,

O You fables spurning the known, eluding the hold  
of the know, mounting to heaven!  
You lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses,  
burnish'd with gold!

Towers of fables immortal fashion'd from mortal dreams!  
You too I welcome and fully the same as the rest!  
You too with joy I sing.  
- Passage to India!

Lo, soul seest than not God's purpose from the first?  
Passage to India!

Lo soul for thee of tableau twain  
I see in one the Suez Canal initiated, opn'd,  
I see the procession of steamships, the Empress  
Engenie's leading the van,  
I mark from on deck the strange landscape,

the pure sky, the level sand in the distance,

I pass swiftly the picturesque groups, the work  
men gather'd

The gigantic dredging machines,  
In one again, different, (yet thine, all thine, O soul the same,)  
I see over my own continent the pacific railroad surmounting every burrier,  
I see continual trains of cars winding along the  
Platte carrying freight and passengers,  
I hear the locomotives rushing and roaring and the shrill steam-whistle,  
I hear the echoes rever-berate through the  
grandest scenery in the world,

I cross the Larmic plains, I note the rocks in grotesque shapes, the butter,  
I see the plentiful larkspur and wild onions, the burrer, colourless, sage-deserts,  
I see in glimpses afar or towering immediately above me the great mountains,

I see the Wind river and the wahsatch mountain,  
I see the Monument mountain and the Eagle's Nest,

I pass the promontory, I ascend the Nevadas,  
I scan the Nobel Elk mountain and wind around its base  
I see the Humboldt range, I tread the valley and cross the  
river,

I see the clear waters of lake Tahoe, I see forests of majestic pines,  
Or crossing the great desert, the alkaline plains,

I behold enchanting mirages of waters and meadows.  
Marking through these and after all, in duplicate slender lines,  
Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel,  
Tying the Eastern to the Western Sea,  
The road between Europe and Asia.

Passage to India!

Struggle of many a captain, tales of many a sailor dead,  
Over my mood stealing and spreading they come,  
Like clouds and cloudlets in the unreach'd sky.  
Along all history, down the slopes,  
As a rivulet running, sinking now, and now again to the surface rising,  
A ceaseless thought, a varied train-lo, soul, thee, thy  
sight, they rise,  
The plans, the voyages again, the expeditions:

Again Vasco de Gama sails forth,  
Again the knowledge gain'd, the mariner's compass,  
Lands found and nations born, thou born America,  
For purpose vast, man's long probation fill'd  
Thou roundure of the world at last accomplish'd.

O vast Roundure, swimming in space.  
Cover'd all over with visible power and beauty,

Alternate light and day and the teeming spiritual darkness,  
Unspeakable high processions of An and moon and countless stars above,

Below the manifold grass and waters, animals, mountains, trees,  
With inscrutable purpose, some hidden prophetic intention,  
Now first it seems my thought begins to span thee.

Down from the gardens of Asia descending radiating,  
Adam and Eve appear, then their myriad progeny after them,  
Wandering, yearning, curious, with restless explorations,  
With questionings, baffled, formless, feverish, with never-happy-hearts,

With that sad incessant refrain, *Wherefore unsatisfied saul? and Whither  
O mocking life?*

Ah who shall soothe these feverish children?  
Who justify these restless explorations?  
Who speak the secret of impassive earth? <sup>Y</sup>  
Who bind it to us? what is this separate Nature so unnatural?  
What is this earth to our affections? (unloving earth, without a throb, to  
answer ours, Cold earth, the place of graves.)

Yet soul be sure the first intent remains and shall be carried out,  
Perhaps even now the time has arrived.

After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd.)  
After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,  
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the  
geologist, ethnologist,

Finally shall come the poet worthi that name,  
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.

Then not your deeds only O voyagers, O scientists and inventors, shall be justified,

All these hearts as of fretted children shall be sooth'd,  
All affection shall be fully responded to, the secret shall be told, --  
All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook'd and link'd together,

The whole earth, this cold, impassive, voiceless earth, shall be completely justified,

Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplished and compacted by the true son of God,  
the poet,

(He shall indeed pass the straits and conquer the mountains,

He shall double the Cape of Good Hope to some purpose,)

Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more,

The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them.

(6)

Year at whose wide-flung door I sing!

Year of the purpose accomplish'd!

Year of the marriage of continents, climates and oceans!

(No mere doge of Venice now wedding the Adriatic,)

I see 0 year in you the vast terraqueous globe given and giving all,

Europe to Asia, Africa join'd, and they to the New World,

The lands, geographies, dancing before you, holding a festival garland,

As brides and bridegrooms hand in hand.

Passage to India!

Cooling airs fro'- Caucasus far, soothing cradle of man;

The river Euphrates-Rowing, the past lit up again, . .

Lo soul, the retrospect brought forward,

The streams of the Indus and the Ganges and their many affluents,

(I my shores of America walking to-day behold, resuming all,)

The tale of Alexander on his warlike marches suddenly dying,

On one side China and on the other side Persia and Arabia,

To the south the great seas and the bay of Bengal,

The flowing literatures, tremendous epics, religions, castes,

Old occult Brahma interminably far back, the tender and junior Buddha,

Central and southern empires and all their belongings, possessors,

The wars of Tamerlane, the reign of Aurungzebe,

The traders, rulers, explorers, Moslems, Venetians, Byzantium,

the Arabs, Portuguese,

The first travelers famous yet, Marco Polo, Batouta the Moor,

Doubts to be solv'd, the map incognita, blanks to be fill'd,

The foot of man unstay'd the hands never at rest,

Thyself O soul that will not brook a challenge.

The mediaeval navigators rise before me,

The world of 1492, with itsawaken'd enterprise,

Something swelling in humanity now like the sap of the earth

in spring,

The sunset splendor of chivalry declining.

And who art thou sad shade?

Gigantic, visionary, thyself a visionary,

With majestic limbs and pious beaming eyes,  
Spreading around with every look of thine a golden world,  
Enhuing it with gorgeous hues.

As the chief histrion,  
Down to the footlights walks in some great scena,  
Dominating the rest I see the Admiral himself,  
(History type of courage, action, faith,)  
Behold him sail from Palos leading his little fleet,  
His voyage behold, his return, his great fame,  
His misfortunes, calumniators, behold him a prisoner, chain'd.  
Behold his dejection, poverty, death.

(Curious in time I stand, noting the efforts of heroes,  
Is the deferment long? bitter the slander, poverty, death?  
Lies the seed unreck'd for centuries in the ground? lo, to God's due occasion,

Uprising in the night, it sprouts, blooms,  
And fills the earth with use and beauty.)

Passage indeed Osoul to primal thought,  
Not lands and seas alone, thy own clear freshness,  
The young maturity of brood and bloom,  
To realms of budding bibles.

O soul, repressless, I with thee and thou with me,  
Thy circumnavigation of the world begin,  
Of man, the voyage of his mind's return,  
To reason's early paradise,  
Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions,  
Again with fair creation.

Owe can wait no longer,  
We too take ship O soul,  
Joyous we too launch out on trackless acts,  
Fearless for unknown shores on waves of ecstasy to sail,  
Amid the wafting winds, (thou pressing me to thee, I thee to me,  
Osoul,)

Caroling free, singing our song of God,  
Chanting our chant of pleasant exploration.

With laugh and many a kiss,  
(Let others deprecate, let others weep for sin, remorse, humiliation,)  
O soul thou pleasest me, I thee.

Ah more than any priest O soul we too believe in God,  
But with the mystery of God we dare not dally.

O soul thou pleasest me, I thee,  
Sailing these seas or on the hills, or waking in the night,  
Thoughts, silent thoughts, of Time and Space and Death, like waters flowing,

Bear me indeed as through the regions infinite,  
Whose air I breathe, whose ripples hear, leave me all over,  
Bathe me O God in thee, mounting to thee,  
I and my soul to range of thee.

O Thou transcendent,  
Nameless, the fibre and the breath,  
Light of the light, shedding forth universes, thou centre of them,  
Thou mightier centre of the true, the good, the loving,  
Thou moral, spiritual fountain-affection's source-thou res'ervoir,  
(O pensile soul of me-0 thirst unsatisfied-waitest not there?  
Waitest not haply for us somewhere there the Comrade perfect?)  
Thou pulse-thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,  
That, circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,  
Athwart the shapeless vastnesses of space,  
How should I think, how breathe a single breath, how speak, if, out of myself,

I could not launch, to those, superior universes?

Swiftly I shrivel at the thought of God,  
At Nature and its wonders, Time and Space and Death,  
But that, I, turning, call to thee O soul, thou actual Me,  
And lo, thou gently masterest the orbs,  
Thou matest Time, smilest conterit at Death,  
And fillest, swellest full the vastnesses of Space.

Greater than stars or suns,  
Bounding O soul thou journeyest forth;  
What love than thine and ours could wider amplify?  
What aspirations, wishes, outviethine and ours O soul?  
What dreams of the ideal? what plans of purity, perfection, strength?  
What cheerful willingness for others' sake to give up all?  
For others' sake to suffer all?

Reckoning ahead O soul, when thou, the time achiev'd  
The seas all cross'd, weather'd, the capes, the voyage done.  
Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the aim attain'd  
As fill'd with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother found,  
The Younger melts in foundness in his arms. †

Passage to more than India!  
Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?  
O soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyages like those?  
Disportest thou on waters such as those?  
Soundest below .the Sanscrit and the Vedas?  
Then have thy bent unleash'd.

Passage to you, your shores, ye aged fierce enigmas!  
Passage to you, to mastership of you, ye strangling problems!  
You, strew'd with the wrecks of skeletons, that, living never reach'd you.

Passage to more than India!  
O secret of the earth and sky!  
Of you O waters of the seal O winding creeks and rivers! '  
Of you O woods and fields! of you strong' mountains of my land!  
Of you O prairies! of you gray rocks!  
O morning red! O clouds! O rain and snows!  
O day and night, passage to you!  
O sun and moon and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter!  
Passage to you!

Passage, immediate passage! the blood bums in my veins!  
Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!  
Cut the hawser-haul out-shake out every sail!  
Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?  
Have we not grovel'd here long enough, eating and drinking like  
mere brutes?

Have we not darken'd and dazed ourselves with books long enough?

Sail forth-steer for the deep waters only,  
Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,  
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,  
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

O my bravesoul!

O farther farther sail!

O daring joy, but safe! are they not all the seas of **God**?

O farther, farther, farther sail!

### Glossary

- 1) **Empress Eugenie**: Empress of France, Wife of Napoleon III. She was aboard the ship leading the procession at the formal opening of the Suez Canal.
- 2) **Christopher Columbus**: Discoverer of America.
- 3) **Vasco da Gama**: Portuguese navigator; the first European to sail to India.
- 4) **Trinitas**: Whitman's approximate Spanish for 'the Holy Trinity'.
- 5) **The Doge** : Chief magistrate of the city-state of Venice (697-1797) symbolized the union of Venice and the sea by annually casting a gold ring into the Adriatic.
- 6) **Caucasus**: Area in Russia between the Black and Caspian seas.
- 7) **Euphrats**: River flowing from Turkey to the Persian Gulf.
- 8) **Tamer-lane** : Mongol conqueror
- 9) **Marco Polo** : Venetian traveller to India.
- 10) **Admiral** : Columbus
- 11) **Batontatbe Moor** : Explorer of Africa and Asia.
- 12) **Palos**: Spanish seafort from which Columbus sailed.

### 2.3.1 Outline of the Poem

Walt Whitman's poem, 'Passage to India', which was first published in 1868, has nine sections. Sections 1 to 3 deal with a journey through space and the exploration of the physical environment by explorers. Sections 4 to 6 deal with a journey through time. Also, the growth of man's culture to explore in these sections. Sections 7 to 8 deal with the exploration of the divine, and the merger of the human soul with the over soul. In section 9, the poet appeals to his soul, to sail out and achieve the spiritual union for which the rounding of the globe has been just a preparation.

Three significant events of 1869 and 1870 inspired Whitman to write 'Passage to India'. The first was the completion of a railroad across North America from 'East to West'; the second was the laying of the trans-Atlantic cable; and the third was the opening of the Suez Canal. These spectacular achievements of science and technology brought the countries of the world-closer. Deep reflections on these achievements form the background to the poem.

### 2.3.2 Interpretation

In the previous section, we have referred to three achievements of science and technology: a) the completion of a railroad across North America from East, to West; b) the laying of the trans-Atlantic cable; and c) the opening of the Suez Canal. After reflecting a lot over the events, Whitman came to the conclusion that the historic sequence of events had a spiritual meaning. He wanted to harmonize the past with the present and he was keen on proving that the past was a part of the present. As a mystic-poet, he thought that he must give a new faith to inspire the future generations. He wrote as follows:

"The past-the dark unfathomed retrospect!  
The seeming gulf-the sleepers and the shadows!  
The past-the infinite greatness of the past!  
For what is the present after all but a growth out of the past".

But, to get into the past i.e. the history of mankind, one should know the contribution of Asia in general and of India in particular. So, the poet wanted his fellowmen to understand 'myths and fables of old, Asia's Africa's fables'. He asked the captains, the voyagers, the explorers, the engineers and the architects to appreciate the beauty of the 'temples fairer than lillies' and admire the 'lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnished with gold'. For, it would serve God's purpose:

"The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,  
The races, neighbours, to marry and be given in marriage,  
The Oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,  
The lands to be welded together".

Of course, this quest for knowledge would bring forth many struggles and a few casualties. But, there would be a lot of achievements too, hands would be born; nations would come into existence. (Thus America was born.) At this juncture, the poet wondered as follows:

"Ah who shall sooth these feverish children?  
Who justify these restless explorations?  
Who speak the secret of impassion earth? "  
Who bind it to us? What is this separate Nature so unnatural?"

According to Whitman, the poet's role would begin in this context. The poet would sing the divine songs about the deeds of the Voyagers and the scientists. Also, the poet would play a vital role in the following activities:

"All these hearts as of fretted children shall be sooth'd,  
All affection shall be fully responded to, the secrets shall be told,  
All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and book'd and link'd together,  
The whole earth, this cold, impassive, voiceless earth, shall be completely justified,  
Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish'd and compacted".

Finally, the poet would fuse Nature and Man together and the spiritual union would be achieved. The poet (in Whitman) would not stop even at this point. He would tell his soul about the 'Passage to more than India'. Further, he would say:

"O my brave soul! <sup>1-</sup>  
O farther, farther sail!  
Odaring joy, but safe! are they not all the seas of God?  
Ofarther, farther, farther sail!

"Passage to India" is, indeed, a passage to more than India. The poem tells about the poet's faith in the 'oneness of all'; his pride in the achievements of mankind in the



field of science and technology; his conception of the role of a poet; and, finally, the union of the human soul with the universal soul.

Further, the poem symbolises, first, the physical exploration carried out by the navigators and explorers through railroad-and seas. Secondly, it symbolizes mankind's exploration of its past. Thirdly, it symbolises the intellectual exploration to unite the past, the present, and the future. Fourthly, the poem also symbolises) man's spiritual exploration which will lead to a fusion of the human soul with the Universal Soul.

### 2.3.3 Poetic Devices in 'Passage to India'

- 1) Whitman, perhaps, was the first poet to exploit to the full the possibilities of free verse. There is a rare compatibility between his form and his themes: the long, unrestrained line in its free flow captures in its very form the spirit of democracy and freedom. For instance :

"Singing my days,  
Singing the great achievements of the present,  
Singing the strong light works of engineers,  
Our modern wonders, (the antique ponderous Seven outvised)  
In the Old World the east the Suez Canal,  
The New by its mighty railroad spann'd,  
The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires".

(By the way, do you know what 'free verse' is? 'Free Verse' (or in the French term **vers libre**) has a more controlled rhythm than ordinary prose, but it lacks the regular stress pattern.)

- 2) Whitman's unit of rhythm is the phrase instead of the foot and his unit of thought is the line instead of the sentence. Keeping in view this point, you should. examine the following lines :

"Passage to India!  
Lo, soul, seest than not God's purpose from the first?  
The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,  
The races, neighbours, to marry and be given in marriage,  
The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,  
The lands to be welded together".

- 3) One of the salient features of Whitman's poetry is 'the catalogue'. For instance :

"The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams,  
The deep diving bibles and legends,  
The daring plots of the poets, the elder religions;"

- 4) 'Repetition' is another feature of the poetry of the Sage of Manhattan. Take a look at the following lines :

"Ah who shall sooth these feverish children?  
Who justify these restless explorations?  
Who speak the secret of impassive earth?  
Who bind it to us?"

- 5) 'Alliteration' is another literary device used by Whitman. The examples are as follows :

budding bibles, singing his songs. Alliteration, as you know, is the repetition of speech sounds in a sequence of nearby words.



The ship has feather'd every rock, the prize we sought  
is war,

The port is near, the bells I hear, the people allexulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and  
daring;

But Oheart! heart! heart!  
Othe bleeding drops of red,  
Where on the deck my captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.

OCaptain! My Captain! rise up and hear the bells;  
Rise up-for you the flag is flung-for you the  
bugle trills,  
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths-for you the  
shores a crowding,  
For you they call, the swaying man, their eager faces  
turning:

Here captain! dear father!  
The arm beneath your head!  
It is some dream that on the deck,  
You've fallen cold and dead. 't  
My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,  
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,  
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyaged used, and done,  
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with  
object won;

Exult Oshores, and ring Obells!  
But I with mournful tread.  
Walk the deck my captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.

#### **2.4.1 Outline of the Poem**

The poet's grief is expressed through the use of symbol and metaphor, The United States is compared to a ship whose captain is Abraham Lincoln. The civil war fought under Lincoln's leadership is called a dangerous voyage. As the captain is brave and skilful, he brings the ship home after the successful completion of the voyage. The people are naturally happy and they want to honour their captain. But, they cannot do so for their captain is assassinated at the very moment of victory. The people eagerly wait on the shore for their captain, but, unfortunately, he is dead. Finally, the poet is left alone on the deck of the ship where his captain lies fallen and dead.

#### **2.4.2 Interpretation**

"O Captain! My Captain!" is one of the well-known poems of Whitman. It is an elegy on the death of Abraham Lincoln, who was the President of the USA from 1860 to 1865. Being kind and, gentle, he could not bear the sight of the wretched and subhuman existence of the negro-slaves of the southern states of his country and thereby, he wanted to abolish slavery. The Southern States at this juncture decided to break away from the Northern States. Abraham Lincoln as the President of the country did not approve of the decision of the Southern States and decided to fight a civil war in the interest of his country.

He fought the war bravely and skillfully and saved his country from disintegration. But hardly a year later, Lincoln was assassinated by an actor, John Wilkes Booth, in a theatre. Consequently, the entire nation plunged into mourning. Walt Whitman, who was an ardent admirer of Lincoln, felt that the death of his leader was a personal loss. This, accounts for the poignancy of the poet's grief in the elegy. A closer analysis of the poem reveals that the opening lines have a measured rhythm that suggests speaker's tone filled with celebration. The lines are made up of two rhyming couplets, so the rhyme scheme follows a regular pattern of AABB.

The opening lines of the poem give us a clear description of the scenes of rejoicing following victorious return of the ship to harbour. The speaker addresses the captain as he congratulates him on navigating the ship through a "fearful" and challenging journey filled with "racks," or storms. After all these dangers, the ship has returned home, having won the "prize" of victory. The lines celebrate the victorious ship with cheers and bells. The ship is described as "steady" but also battle-hardened, "grim," and "daring," thus emphasizing its bravery and longevity in the face of long dangers.

It is to be noted that the poem opens with a repeated apostrophe—which, from context, you will be able to understand that the poem is addressed to Abraham Lincoln. In each stanza, four seven-beat lines (each the equivalent of two standard ballad lines of tetrameter and trimeter), are followed by a slightly changing ballad refrain. The refrain—after two trimeters—returns to the tetrameter / trimeter ballad beat. The poem, by its use of this form, implies that soldiers and sailors have a right to verse written for them in the sort of regularly rhyming stanzas that they like best.

In the beginning, it is hinted as if the speaker is a kind of spokesperson for the crowds who cheer the return of the ship, noting that "our fearful trip is done" and "the prize we sought is won." In due course, however, the poem brings out a gap between the speaker and the celebrations around him. While the people are "exulting" or celebrating, the speaker fixates on the drops of blood on the deck of the ship and expresses his grief that the captain has "fallen cold and dead" even at the height of his triumph.

The poem sets up a comparison and projects President Lincoln to a captain and the United States to a ship. This prize is a metaphor for the Union's victory in the war, which had finally come about, after a long struggle, in 1865. The speaker describes how the "ship is anchor'd safe and sound," just as the Union emerged triumphant after years of struggle against the Confederacy.

But although the ship's voyage comes to an end, this is not the conclusion of the extended metaphor. What looks like a triumphant nautical metaphor for President Lincoln's able leadership and the Union's victory soon turns tragic, as it turns out that the "captain" of the poem's governing metaphor has in fact died, even as the city celebrates the victorious ship. In this way, the poet takes a conventional extended metaphor—comparing a political leader to a captain of a ship—and recasts it in a more melancholy and reflective tone.

The word "fearful" is used twice in the poem, used both times in the phrase "fearful trip." This is done to underline the fact that the journey undertaken by the ship was full of challenges and "fearful" in the sense of "inspiring fear." However, despite the frightening challenges faced by the ship, it has nonetheless returned victorious.

Whitman had written of Lincoln: "UNIONISM, in its truest and amplest sense, formed the hardpan of his character." The ship of state did, of course, hold and sail into the Union "port," but at the cost of even Lincoln himself, who was shot on April 14, 1865, by a Secessionist five days after the Confederate General, Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox. The surrender, the viability of the Union, and the end of slavery are all part and parcel of the "prize we sought" (line 2) and the "object won" (line 20).

Modern critics have often been seen arguing that the poem is aesthetically inferior to Whitman's later, more experimental poetry, and adding Whitman's own statement later in life that he wished he had never written it.

At the same time, however, proponents of the poem have suggested that the poem's accessible and regular language and meter offers a vehicle through which to express powerful emotions in a more regulated form. Needless to say, The poem was enormously popular when it was first published and is still regularly memorized and recited, suggesting that it offered a way for the American people to express their collective grief.

### 2.4.3 Poetic Devices in the Poem

- 1) 'O Captain! My Captain!' is not a formless poem. In fact, it is Whitman's best poem in rhyme and near regular metre. It is a poem in three stanzas of eight lines each, each stanza having a regular rhyme-pattern.
- 2) We have already said that 'O Captain! My Captain!' is an elegy. What is an elegy? An elegy is a formal and sustained poem of lament for the death of a particular person. The present poem is a lament for the death of Abraham Lincoln.
- 3) 'Metaphor' is used by Whitman in this poem. The USA is the ship and its captain is the president, Abraham Lincoln. The war waged against the Southern States was the voyage undertaken by the captain.'

### Self-Check Exercise 2

Answer the following questions.

- 1) Write a brief note on the outline of 'OCaptain! My Captain! (100 words)

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- 2) Write a brief note on the poetic devices used in 'OCaptain! My captain!' (100 words)

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- .....  
.....
- 3) "Again Vasco de Gama sails forth  
Again the knowledge gain'd the mariner's compass,  
Lands found and nations born; thou born America"  
Explain the above lines. (100 words)

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## 2.5 SUMMING UP

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**Walt Whitman** was another American poet who was profoundly influenced by Indian Thought. The **poem**, 'Passage to India' contains passages describing India's greatness and its glorious contribution to world thought; of course, 'Passage to India' is a passage to more than India. 'O Captain! My Captain!' is an elegy written by Whitman to commemorate the sacrifice made by Abraham Lincoln. Both poems reflect the essential features of Whitman's poetry.

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## 2.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

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### Self-check Exercise 1

- 1) Read Sections 2.2.3 and 2.3.4 thoroughly and then answer the question.
- 2) Read the poem again and refer to the section devoted to the poem.

### Self-check Exercise 2

- 1) Refer Section 2.4.2
- 2) Read the poem thoroughly and refer Section 2.4.3

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## UNIT 3 EMILY DICKINSON: Because I Could Not Stop for Death, A Thought Went Up My Mind Today, Death Sets a Thing Significant

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)
- 3.3 Because I could not Stop for Death
  - 3.3.1 Introduction
  - 3.3.2 The Text
  - 3.3.3 Glossary
  - 3.3.4 A Critical Appreciation
  - 3.3.5 Themes/ Questions for Discussion
- 3.4 A Thought Went up My Mind Today
  - 3.4.1 Introduction
  - 3.4.2 The Text
  - 3.4.3 An Analysis of the Poem
  - 3.4.4 Themes/ Questions for Discussion
- 3.5 Death Sets a Thing Significant
  - 3.5.1 Introduction
  - 3.5.2 The Text
  - 3.5.3 Glossary
  - 3.5.4 A Critical Evaluation of the Poem
  - 3.5.5 Themes/Questions for Discussion
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Answers to Self-check Exercises

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit you will be able to:

- write about Emily Dickinson’s life and work
- critically evaluate Dickinson’s poetry in detail with reference to:
  - i) Because I could not Stop for Death
  - ii) A Thought Went up my Mind
  - iii) Death Sets a Thing Significant

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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Emily Dickinson is a remarkably singular American poet. Her favourite themes include love, death, immortality, friendship and nature. Her poems are noted for her terse style and deft use of symbols and images. She published only seven poems during her lifetime, that too, anonymously. However, she attained widespread popularity and an ever increasing acceptance among critics. Her unconventional uses of the mechanics of language like the frequent use of dashes, ungrammatical phrasing, strange and stunning images, and, aphoristic wit have influenced many of the 20<sup>th</sup> century poets.

As one of the foremost women writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century America too, Dickinson gains significance. But she didn’t associate with the simmering feminist ideals and struggles. She led a life of solitude and kept away from society as far as possible. Feminist critics read in her poems the feelings and frustrations of a typical ‘caged’ nineteenth century

woman writer for whom poetry was an outlet for suppressed emotions. You would see more about her almost reclusive life in the next section where her biographical details are given.

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### 3.2 EMILY DICKINSON (1830-1886)

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Emily Dickinson was born on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1830 at Amherst, Massachusetts. Her father, Edward Dickinson was a respected state legislator, Congressman and judge. We know very little of her early life. Most of her lifetime was spent in Amherst itself except for a few brief visits to Boston, Philadelphia and Washington. She spent a few years at a primary school and later attended Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Even in childhood she used to withdraw from the world outside her home. This tendency became more evident as she grew up and in her youth she became a total recluse who never left her parental house and garden. It is said that she was reluctant to receive visitors, stopped attending church services, and dressed in white clothes alone.

Nevertheless, she managed to keep her friendship with many through her correspondence. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* published in 1958 is the source of her biographical details. The letters also delineate her emotional and aesthetic life, though in a rather veiled manner. We may assume from the letters she wrote to someone whom she addressed as ‘Master’ that she went through several emotional crises in her twenties. In the poems written during this period she gives vent to her frustrated hopes and transitory delights. Her poetic output during 1862 was prolific writing about three hundred and fifty poems. They reveal a desperate soul’s poignant attempts to seek meaning in a steadily shrinking personal world.

The same year she sent some of her poems to the critic, Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Despite his positive response, the poems didn’t get published. By the time of her death on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1886, she wrote about 1775 poems which assured her posthumous reputation as a poet of rare charm. After her death, her sister Lavinia found her manuscript in her room. The first collection of Dickinson’s poems, edited by Higginson and Mabel L. Todd was published in 1890. Six more volumes of her poems were published in between 1914 and 1937 and they were edited by Dickinson’s niece, Martha Dickinson Binchi and Alfred L. Hampson.

#### Self-check Exercise I

1) Where did Emily Dickinson spend most of her life?

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2) What is peculiar about the poet’s life?

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3) What is the source of Emily Dickinson’s biographical details?  
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4) Was Dickinson famous as a poet during her lifetime?  
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5) Who edited the first collection of Dickinson’s poems?  
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### 3.3 BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH

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#### 3.3.1 Introduction

Have you ever read a poem or short story dealing with death? How death is usually presented in folklore and literature? Isn’t death often pictured as something grave, somber, painful or formidable? Well, here is a poem that looks at death from a different angle.

The poem deals with death and immortality in a manner that is quite singular. It is often referred to as “The Chariot,” a title that evokes its central image of the chariot ride with death, the amiable gentleman caller who comes to take the poet out on a ride. The poem presents the coming of Death as a casual event. It begins rather abruptly, calling attention to the unexpected arrival of death personified as a polite gentleman. There is one more traveller, Immortality. Since the soul is immortal it may be regarded as a journey towards eternity.

Now read the poem and refer to the glossary.

#### 3.3.2 The Text

Because I could not stop for Death–  
He kindly stopped for me–  
The carriage held just ourselves  
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – he knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labour and my leisure too,  
For his civility–

We passed the school, where children strove  
At recess in the ring–  
We passed the fields of gazing grain–  
We passed the setting sun–

10

Or rather– he passed us–  
The dews grew quivering and chill–  
For only gossamer, my gown  
My tippet– only tulle–  
15

We paused before a house that seemed  
A swelling of the ground–  
The roof was scarcely visible–  
The cornice– in the ground–  
20

Since then– ‘tis centuries– and yet  
Feels shorter than a day  
I first surmised the horses’ heads  
Were toward eternity–

### 3.3.3 Glossary

Line 6 *put away*: given up

7 labour and leisure encompass all her worldly interests and activities she abandons for Death

8 *civility*: polite behaviour

9 *strove*: (here) played

10 at *recess*: during leisure time

*ring*: open space

15 *gossamer*: transparent thin fabric

16 *tippet*: scarf

*tulle*: soft fine cloth made of silk or nylon used especially for making veils

20 *cornice*: a decorative border around the top of the walls in a room or on the outside walls of a building

23 *surmised*: guessed

### Self-check Exercise II

Now see if you can answer these questions briefly.

1) Who are the travelers in the carriage?

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2) What is the figure of speech employed in the first stanza?

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3) How is death presented in the poem?

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4) Why did the chariot move slowly?

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5) Why had she given up her labour and leisure?

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6) What do the school, the gazing grain and the setting sun signify?

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7) Where did the chariot stop?

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8) Why does the house seem to be a swelling of the ground?

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9) Why does the poet feel that the centuries seem shorter than the day?

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10) What was the destination of the chariot?

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You must have answered most of the questions. Read the next section carefully and see if you need to modify your answers. The next section is followed by a few more questions which should be answered in detail.

### 3.3.4 A Critical Appreciation

“Because I could not Stop for Death”, as Allen Tate calls it, is “one of the perfect and greatest poems in the English language.” The poem deals with Death and Immortality, two recurring themes in Emily Dickinson’s poetry. The poem conceives of death in terms of routine life, not as something alien and sublime. The poet has a clear perception which manifests in the precision of images chosen by her.

Death is presented as a gentleman who has kindly stopped to take the poet out on a drive in his carriage. The word “kindly” (line 2) defines the sort of relationship between the poet and death. The loneliness of the journey with Death is dispelled by the presence of Immortality, the companion of Death. It also brings in a religious element since death is the gateway to immortality in religious thought. However, the terror of Death is diminished by presenting it as a kind gentleman suitor taking a lady out for a ride. He has the compassionate mission of taking her out of the woes of the world.

The relationship between the poet and Death is further defined in the second stanza. It is a smooth, unstrained relationship. Death is in no hurry; the poet affirms that he “knew no haste” (line 5). Death shows an easy familiar intimacy that is reassuring for the poet. The poet bids farewell to the world. Though too preoccupied with life like most human beings to wait for death she leaves her labour and leisure, that is, her worldly interests

and possessions. The unhurried movement the carriage also hints at the slow-paced hearse heading on to the burial ground.

The third stanza presents the poet's intensely conscious leave taking of the world. Dickinson renders it through a fine economy of words. The poet presents three images: playing school children, fields of grain and the setting sun. They seem to represent the three stages in human life, childhood, maturity and old age. The labour and leisure of the second stanza are made concrete in the in the joyous activity of the children at play. And it is contrasted with the passivity of nature (the gazing grain). The indifference of nature to the death of human beings is highlighted by transferring the final stare in the dead traveller's eyes to the gazing grain. The setting sun brings in the eternal darkness associated with death. The sequence of images can also be explained as the natural route of a funeral procession, passing the school, the outlying cornfields of the village and moving on to the remote cemetery.

When the poet says that the carriage passed the setting sun she has not come to terms with the unknown realms into which she has now entered. But soon she realises her mistake and comprehends that she is out of the bounds human time. Eternity is a world of boundless time and so she corrects herself by saying that the sun passed them. Sun, the assured mark of the passage of time for life on earth is no longer valid for the poet. She speaks of the bitter cold she experienced in the fourth stanza. As the dews descent "quivering and chill" she realises what it feels to come to rest in the cold damp ground. The gown and scarf she wore were so thin and could not protect her from cold. According to some critics gossamer and tippet are the common funeral dress of women. Moreover, Death is traditionally associated with chillness and cold.

The carriage stops at a house that seems "a swelling of the ground." Evidently it is suggestive of the mound over a grave. Moreover the roof of the house was too low to be easily visible. Besides, its cornice is in the ground. Such details of herdescription of the house identify it with the grave. But the tomb's horror is alleviated by the fact that the journey has not ended there. They are merely pausing there as though it is a hospice form where the journey will resume.

The final stanza of the poem seems to project the last sensations before her world fades out. She refers to a single visible object, the horses' heads, recalled in a flash of memory. That was the first object on which her eyes were fixed throughout the journey with death. Moreover the reference to the horses' heads brings to our mind the carriage in the opening stanza. The chariot reaches the limits of mortality when it stops at the house of death. It is not her real destination. The poet says that centuries have passed. It shows the transition from time to eternity. Yet she feels it to be shorter than a day. Human dimension of time is irrelevant in the timeless world of eternity.

The poem is flawless in employing precise and discrete images which enhance the central image of the chariot ride with Death. But the chariot relentlessly moves on to the mysterious world of eternity. By civilizing death and by familiarising herself with it, it is made tolerable. Throughout the poem Death is viewed from diverse perspectives. It is a welcome relief from life's tension and so the poet is ready for a calm ride with it. It heightens one's satisfaction with life and so the poet is ready to discard her labour and leisure. It leads one to a finer world beyond the temporal devoid of the trials and tribulations of everyday existence. Thus the poet portrays death as a solemn guide that leads man to immortality.

### **3.3.5 Themes/Questions for Discussion**

- 1) What is the central theme of the poem?

- 2) How does Dickinson portray death?
- 3) What symbols does the poet employ?
- 4) The role of Immortality in the poem.
- 5) Is there a central image in the poem? How does it unify the thematic and structural elements in the poem?

## 3.4 A THOUGHT WENT UP MY MIND TODAY

### 3.4.1 Introduction

Isn't it quite usual for all of us to have recurring thoughts? What have you felt when a thought or recollection comes to your mind unexpectedly after an interval of time? Do such thoughts trouble you? Or do you just ignore them as irrelevant? Well, a poet's response to such things which we think as trivial may lead to significant ideas and insight into life. Even shapeless ideas can lead to something worthwhile.

Read this short poem by Emily Dickinson and try to make sense of it.

### 3.4.2 The Text

A thought went up my mind today  
 That I have had before,  
 But did not finish,—some way back,  
 I could not fix the year,

Nor where it went, nor why it came  
 The second time to me,  
 Nor definitely what it was,  
 Have I the art to say.

But somewhere in my soul, I know  
 I've met the thing before;  
 It just reminded me—'t was all—  
 And came my way no more.

### Self-check Exercise III

Now that you have read the poem try to answer the following questions:

- 1) Was it the first time that the thought occurred to the poet?

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- 2) Was the thought a clearly defined one?

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3) Does the poet specify when she had the thought before?

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4) Does the poet say why it is repeated?

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5) Why does the poet keep the nature of the thought a mystery?

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Now read the analysis of the poem in the next section and try to have a deeper understanding of the poem

### 3.4.4 An Analysis of the Poem

On the surface level the poem is quite simple though what the poet says about is rather vague. She thought of something on a day that she hadn't thought of for a long time. She doesn't know why she stopped thinking about it back then. Also, she cannot say why she thought about it again, after so long. In fact, she couldn't even say for sure what the thought was. All she knows is that the thought gave her a brief moment of realization and then disappeared. Thus at the centre of the poem is a paradox as the poet is describing something which she cannot clearly define.

The poem begins by referring to a very commonplace occurrence. A thought props up in the poet's mind. It is a thought that she had had before. But then the thought was not a finished, clearly defined one. She does not remember how long before she had this thought first. She cannot remember the exact time of its previous occurrence. So the description is rather vague. But the poet is not telling us about something concrete, which registers through the senses. The poet is attempting to convey something – a thought – which is abstract. Therefore, the vague description suits the theme of the poem. Furthermore thoughts spring from the mind which too, cannot be defined in concrete terms.

The poet cannot remember where the thought went to or why such a thought occurred to her. That is, the occasion of the thought or the source which inspired it is also kept in the dark. Why it recurred too, is unknown. The poet says in clear terms that she cannot say definitely what it was, thus emphasizing its shapeless and elusive nature. The poet says that she lacks the skill to describe it in specific clear cut terms. Despite the fact that the poet is unable to say precisely what the thought is, it is not totally unknown to her. Deep within her soul she knows that it is familiar to her. That is why she is able to realise that it has occurred to her in the past. The reappearance of the thought was just a reminder and it never comes to the poet again.

The poet is unable to give a precise expression to the thought. But a thought exists when we can say what it is. An author can express any thought that crosses her mind, at least approximately. The poet insists on keeping us in the dark about the nature and reason behind the thought. Therefore, it is obvious that thought itself does not form the subject matter of the poem. The thought becomes a metaphor for the mysteries of human existence. It may allude to life itself which we cannot define in precise terms in spite of the fact that we have an awareness about it. Again, the inexpressibility of the thought may also refer to the mysterious working of the human mind. The working of the mind is as unpredictable as the appearance and vanishing of the thought and is as indescribable as the elusive thought that defies explanation in specific terms. It may also refer to the creation of art. A work of art emanates from the creative mind of an artist but how it evolves or why it came into being remains a mystery. Thus Emily Dickinson looks into the many mysteries that hover over our existence which elude exact description even though we are conscious of them.

### **3.4.5 Themes/Questions for Discussion**

- 1) How do you account for the characteristic vagueness of the poem?
- 2) What does the poet say about the thought she had?
- 3) The possible metaphorical dimensions of the mysterious thought.

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## **3.5 DEATH SETS A THING SIGNIFICANT**

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### **3.5.1 Introduction**

Doesn't an insignificant thing become valuable when it is given to you by someone dear to you? Don't you prize little things that someone beloved gave you? This common experience of humanity forms the background of this poem which discusses how death transforms things that we regard too commonplace to take notice of, things we usually take for granted. Dickinson thinks over the effect of death on commonplace things of little relevance. For all of us little things become significant for their emotional value.

This is true of artifacts too. Artifacts are valued more after the death of the person who made them. That is, Death endows them with an emotional value. Last works are often valued as memorials of the departed. Commonplace and insignificant things are prized especially for the reason that they are souvenirs of our loved ones.

Now read on the poem carefully and try to answer the questions that follow

### **3.5.2 The Text**

Death sets a thing significant  
The eye had hurried by,  
Except a perished creature  
Entreat us tenderly



To ponder little workmanships 5  
In crayon or in wool,  
With “This was last her fingers did,”  
Industrious until

The thimble weighed too heavy,  
The stitches stopped themselves, 10  
And then’t was put among the dust  
Upon the closet shelves.

A book I have, a friend gave,  
Whose pencil, here and there,  
Had notched the place that pleased him, — 15  
At rest his fingers are.

Now, when I read, I read not,  
For interrupting tears  
Obliterate the etchings  
Too costly for repairs. 20

### 3.5.3 Glossary

Line 3 *a perished creature*: some dear departed

Line 5 *workmanships*: skilled works of art or craft

Line 8 *Industrious*: hardworking; making too much effort

Line 9 *thimble*: a small metal or plastic object you wear on your finger to protect it when sewing

Line 15 *notched*: made markings

### Self-check Exercise IV

1) What does the poet mean by the phrase “Death sets a thing significant”?

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2) How do we usually regard commonplace things?

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3) What change does death bring in our perception of ordinary little things?

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4) Why do we find little things significant after the death of a dear one?

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5) What is special about the book the poet's friend gave her?

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6) Why does the poet say that her fingers are at rest?

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7) Why does the poet find it difficult to read the book?

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### 3.5.4 A Critical Evaluation of the Poem

The poem opens with a statement of its theme, which is that death makes things more significant. We usually overlook things that are part of our day-to-day life and the little things that belong to or made by our dear ones. The poet goes on to describe finding a friend's writing and sketches- things which "the eye had hurried by" previously that have now become meaningful after the death of the friend.

In the second stanza Dickinson evokes a common feeling experienced after the loss of a dear one: the desire to think over the traces left by the dear departed. Now the trivial "workmanships" in crayon or wool are strangely transformed. They become almost as significant as the person who died. They gain importance and become valuable as the things in which the beloved was last engaged in. They are the things that our loved ones created last and as they are now dead themselves seem to be ingrained in what they have left behind.

The industrious work of the departed must have been put to a sudden halt by death. The last work of the poet's friend had the same fate as her life. Her work continued until her body could no longer function and the sewing stopped. So the thimble weighed too

heavy for her fingers and the stitches automatically stopped. Her work was “put among the dust; upon the closet shelves” just as her body was buried in the grave.

Then the poet speaks about a book her friend gave her. There are markings in pencil inside the book. But the fingers that made those marks are at rest now. Her friend’s etchings in the pages of the book are insignificant as such. But they become invaluable as they remind a dear friend who has passed away. As she attempts to read the book now it becomes impossible to continue reading. Tears fill her eyes and blur her sight. Teardrops may fall on the pages and obliterate the markings made by the friend which are invaluable and too costly for repairs. Dickinson narrates how insignificant things become unique and precious after the death of a dear one.

### **3.5.5 Themes/Questions for Discussion**

- 1) How does death transform insignificant things?
- 2) The novelty of Dickinson’s perspective on death.
- 3) What aspect of death does the poet highlight in the poem?

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## **3.6 LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit you read about one of the most significant American women poets, Emily Dickinson. You read about her strange life, and the features of her poetry that make her poems uniquely attractive. Finally you studied three of her lyrics in detail. You should now be able to appreciate, analyse and discuss Dickinson’s poetry in general and the three poems in depth.

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## **3.7 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES**

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### **Self-check Exercise I**

- 1) In her native town of Amherst.
- 2) She withdrew from the outside world and became a recluse. Practically, she never left her parental house.
- 3) *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*
- 4) No. She gained reputation as a poet posthumously.
- 5) Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel L. Todd

### **Self-Check Exercise II**

- 1) Death, Immortality and the Poet are the travellers in the carriage.
- 2) Personification.
- 3) Death is presented as a gentleman who has kindly stopped to take the poet out on a drive in the carriage.
- 4) Death is in no hurry. So they drove slowly. Moreover, a funeral procession usually moves in a slow pace.
- 5) The poet had given up her labour and leisure as a sign of politeness to Death. She had to give up her worldly interests and pleasures to accompany Death.

- 6) They represent the three stages in human life. The school, the gazing grain and the setting sun symbolise childhood, maturity and old age respectively.
- 7) The chariot stopped before a house that seemed a swelling of the ground, that is, the grave.
- 8) The house where they reach is the grave itself. The phrase 'a swelling of the ground' is suggestive of the mound of earth over a grave.
- 9) Death has taken the poet to the world of eternity where the human notion of time is irrelevant. So the poet feels that though centuries have passed it is shorter than a day.
- 10) The destination of the chariot was eternity. Thought it stopped at the grave, the chariot of Death leads the poet into the world of immortality.

### **Self-Check Exercise III**

- 1) No. the thought has occurred to the poet before.
- 2) No, it was rather a vague thought. She cannot say exactly what the thought was.
- 3) The poet does not specify when she had the thought before. She cannot remember how long before it occurred to her. But she knows that it is recurring now.
- 4) The poet does not know why the thought is repeating. She is unaware of the occasion or the source of inspiration for such a repetitive thought.
- 5) The poet is trying to convey something that is abstract. So she keeps the nature of the thought a mystery. The thought is shapeless and elusive as it is a metaphor for the mystery of human existence.

### **Self-Check Exercise IV**

- 1) The poet refers to the strange power of death to make commonplace things significant and valuable.
- 2) We usually overlook things that are part of our everyday life. We ignore commonplace things that belong to or made by our dear ones.
- 3) After the death of our dear ones we regard the ordinary little things that belong to them precious and significant.
- 4) The little things become almost as significant as the person who died. They gain importance and become valuable as things that belonged to the dear departed.
- 5) Inside the book there are markings in pencil made by the friend. They are the last markings the dear friend made and so they are precious.
- 6) The poet says that her fingers are at rest because the friend is dead.
- 7) The poet finds it difficult to read the book because it reminds her of the dead friend. Tears fill her eyes and blur her sight. So it is difficult for her to continue reading.

## Supplementary Reading

### A Child Said, What Is The Grass?

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;  
How could I answer the child. . .I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,  
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped,  
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we  
may see and remark, and say Whose?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child. . .the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,  
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,  
Growing among black folks as among white,  
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the  
same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,  
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,  
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them;  
It may be you are from old people and from women, and  
from offspring taken soon out of their mother's laps,  
And here you are the mother's laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,  
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,  
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues!  
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,  
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of  
their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?  
What do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere;  
The smallest sprouts show there is really no death,  
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,  
And ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward. . .and nothing collapses,  
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

Walt Whitman

### Prayer of Columbus

It was near the close of his indomitable and pious life—on his last voyage when nearly 70 years of age—that Columbus, to save his two remaining ships from foundering in the Caribbean Sea in a terrible storm, had to run them ashore on the Island of Jamaica—where, laid up for a long and miserable year—1503—he was taken very sick, had several relapses, his men revolted, and death seem'd daily imminent; though he was eventually rescued, and sent home to Spain to die, unrecognized, neglected and in want.....It is only ask'd, as preparation and atmosphere for the following lines, that the bare authentic facts be recall'd and realized, and nothing contributed by the fancy. See, the Antillean Island, with its florid skies and rich foliage and scenery, the waves beating the solitary sands, and the hulls of the ships in the distance. See, the figure of the great Admiral, walking the beach, as a stage, in this sublimest tragedy—for what tragedy, what poem, so piteous and majestic as the real scene?—and hear him uttering—as his mystical and religious soul surely utter'd, the ideas following—perhaps, in their equivalents, the very words.

A BATTER'D, wreck'd old man,  
Thrown on this savage shore, far, far from home,  
Pent by the sea, and dark rebellious brows, twelve dreary months,  
Sore, stiff with many toils, sickened, and nigh to death,  
I take my way along the island's edge,  
Venting a heavy heart.

I am too full of woe!  
Haply, I may not live another day;  
I can not rest, O God—I can not eat or drink or sleep,  
Till I put forth myself, my prayer, once more to Thee,  
Breathe, bathe myself once more in Thee—commune with Thee,  
Report myself once more to Thee.

Thou knowest my years entire, my life,  
(My long and crowded life of active work—not adoration merely;)

Thou knowest the prayers and vigils of my youth;  
Thou knowest my manhood's solemn and visionary meditations;  
Thou knowest how, before I commenced, I devoted all to come to Thee;  
Thou knowest I have in age ratified all those vows, and strictly kept them;  
Thou knowest I have not once lost nor faith nor ecstasy in Thee;  
(In shackles, prison'd, in disgrace, repining not,  
Accepting all from Thee—as duly come from Thee.)

All my emprises have been fill'd with Thee,  
My speculations, plans, begun and carried on in thoughts of Thee,  
Sailing the deep, or journeying the land for Thee;  
Intentions, purports, aspirations mine—leaving results to Thee.

O I am sure they really come from Thee!  
The urge, the ardor, the unconquerable will,  
The potent, felt, interior command, stronger than words,  
A message from the Heavens, whispering to me even in sleep,  
These sped me on.

By me, and these, the work so far accomplish'd (for what has been,  
has been;)  
By me Earth's elder, cloy'd and stifled lands, uncloy'd, unloos'd;  
By me the hemispheres rounded and tied—the unknown to the known.

The end I know not—it is all in Thee;  
Or small, or great, I know not—haply, what broad fields, what lands;  
Haply, the brutish, measureless human undergrowth I know,  
Transplanted there, may rise to stature, knowledge worthy Thee;  
Haply the swords I know may there indeed be turn'd to reaping-tools;  
Haply the lifeless cross I know—Europe's dead cross—may bud and  
blossom there.

One effort more—my altar this bleak sand:  
That Thou, O God, my life hast lighted,  
With ray of light, steady, ineffable, vouchsafed of Thee,  
(Light rare, untellable—lighting the very light!  
Beyond all signs, descriptions, languages!)  
For that, O God—be it my latest word—here on my knees,  
Old, poor, and paralyzed—I thank Thee.

My terminus near,  
The clouds already closing in upon me,  
The voyage balk'd—the course disputed, lost,  
I yield my ships to Thee.

Steersman unseen! henceforth the helms are Thine;  
Take Thou command—(what to my petty skill Thy navigation?)  
My hands, my limbs grow nerveless;  
My brain feels rack'd, bewilder'd; Let the old timbers part—I will not part!  
I will cling fast to Thee, O God, though the waves buffet me;  
Thee, Thee, at least, I know.

Is it the prophet's thought I speak, or am I raving?  
What do I know of life? what of myself?

I know not even my own work, past or present;  
Dim, ever-shifting guesses of it spread before me,  
Of newer, better worlds, their mighty parturition,  
Mocking, perplexing me.

And these things I see suddenly—what mean they?  
As if some miracle, some hand divine unseal'd my eyes,  
Shadowy, vast shapes, smile through the air and sky,  
And on the distant waves sail countless ships,  
And anthems in new tongues I hear saluting me.

Walt Whitman

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## UNIT 4 ALEXIE SHERMAN ALEXIE ‘CROW TESTAMENT’ & ‘EVOLUTION’

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, we shall study the core features of Alexi Sherman poetry in general and take up two of his poems for detailed study. Winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the PEN/Malamud Award for Short Fiction, a PEN/Hemingway Citation for Best First Fiction, and the National Book Award for Young People's Literature, Sherman Alexie is a poet, short story writer, novelist, and performer. Alexie's poetry and the entire body of works explore themes of despair, poverty, violence and alcoholism among the lives of Native American people, both on and off the reservation. We will examine all these issues and themes.

After reading this Unit, you should be able to interpret the prescribed poems of Alexie Sherman in terms of Indian thought.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Alexi Sherman has published 26 books including his recently released memoir, *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me*, his first picture book, *Thunder Boy Jr*, and young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, all from Little, Brown Books; *What I've Stolen, What I've Earned*, a book of poetry, from Hanging Loose Press; and *Blasphemy: New and Selected Stories*, from Grove Press. We will try to examine the fundamental questions across all of his works: "What does it mean to live as an Indian in this time? What does it mean to be an Indian man? Finally, what does it mean to live on an Indian reservation?" The protagonists in most of his literary works exhibit a constant struggle with themselves and their own sense of powerlessness in white American society. The two poems selected for detailed discussions allow all the scope that we need to understand. We take up a para wise discussion to underline the significant issues related to Native American identity in relation to the larger framework of American literature.

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### 4.2 ALEXIE SHERMAN: LIFE AND WORKS

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Sherman Alexie was born in 1966 in Spokane, Washington. He is a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene tribal member and grew up on the Spoken Indian Reservation. After a childhood plagued with illness, he attended Jesuit Gonzaga University before transferring to Washington State University in 1987. It was here that he first began to write poetry and prose.



Alexie has published a number of prize winning books that detail the lives of Native Americans living on reservations. One of his most well-known works, the collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, won a PEN/Hemingway Award. Additionally, his poetic works earned him the World Heavyweight Poetry title, which he held for four years.

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### 4.3 ALEXIE SHERMAN: CROW TESTAMENT

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#### Analysis of *Crow Testament*

1

Cain lifts Crow, that heavy black bird  
and strikes down Abel.  
Damn, says Crow, I guess  
this is just the beginning.

In the first section of this piece the speaker begins with the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain uses “Crow” to kill his brother Abel. Right from the beginning of the poem “Crow” is being used by the white man without his consent. In this case, Alexie has chosen to portray Crow as a weapon.

In the second half of the section Crow exclaims, professing his understanding that his mistreatment is just beginning. Crow will stand in as a symbol for the Native populations of the Americas and Alexie will take the reader through varying symbols representing the white settlers, and the present white majority of America. Crow knows, from this first brutal action that,  
This is just the beginning.

2

The white man, disguised  
as a falcon, swoops in  
and yet again steals a salmon  
from Crow's talons.  
Damn, says Crow, if I could swim

I would have fled this country years ago. The second section is written in a similar fashion to the first in which Crow finds himself taken advantage of.

Alexie has chosen to portray the “white man” as a “falcon.” The embodiment of the white man doesn’t just appear as a falcon, he is “disguised” as one. This adds an additional level of cunning to the scene.

The falcon swoops down from the sky and steals directly from Crow’s hands, or “talons.” This theft is a clear reference to the endless damage done to Native Americans, from the theft of land to the mass exterminations that took place at the hands of the United States government and all leaders in North and South America.

In the shorter second half Crow reflects that if he was able to “swim” he could have “fled this country years ago.” If he had been born with this ability, he could have let himself be taken out to sea, and away from the damage he is living in.

3

The Crow God as depicted  
in all of the reliable Crow bibles  
looks exactly like a Crow.

Damn, says Crow, this makes it so much easier to worship myself. The speaker takes a different approach in the third section in which he further reflects on the role of religion in modern society. The poet presents for the reader “The Crow God” that appears identical to the crows that worship him.

He then provides commentary that leads to an explanation of this shift. Crow is considering the absurdity of worshipping a god that looks like you. At the same time he is pointing out the vanity in this depiction. Only the “White Man” would make a god such as this, as the familiar image makes worship, so much easier...

4

Among the ashes of Jericho, Crow sacrifices his firstborn son.  
Damn, says Crow, a million nests are soaked with blood.

In this section the speaker continues to describe the place of Native Americans, through the Crow metaphor. The narrative is now expanding to include other events from the bible, such as the Battle of Jericho. During this pivotal Biblical moment, the Israelites destroy the city of Jericho. In Alexie’s narrative the city stands in for the entire population of native people who were decimated by the arrival of the white man. In this case, the “ashes of Jericho” are home to the son of Crow” and,

...a million nests...soaked with blood. This destruction is their inheritance and is home to their futures.

5

When Crows fight Crows  
the sky fills with beaks and talons.  
Damn, says Crow, it's raining feathers.

Not only does Crow have to be cautious of the white man in his many forms, Crow often “fights Crow.” It is in these instances that the most damage is done and the sky seems to “rain feathers.”

It is clear that any division between the Native peoples further hurts their chances of finding a way out from under, or a way to stand up against, the white man.

6

Crow flies around the reservation  
and collects empty beer bottles  
but they are so heavy  
he can only carry one at a time.

So, one by one, he returns them  
but gets only five cents a bottle.  
Damn, says Crow, redemption  
is not easy.

The sixth section of this piece is the longest, and takes the speaker into the present day in

which the suffering of the Native American people has not abated, but only changed forms.

On a contemporary reservation, Crow, still seen as a representative of the Native peoples, is flying around searching for, “empty beer bottles.” The collection of these bottles provides him with a very limited income, but also serves as commentary on the health of the reservation. Alcoholism is one of the most rampant diseases on reservations and the poet’s choice to have beer bottles provide Crow with a small stipend is quite poignant.

Crow battles through poverty, alcoholism, and even then, the transportation of the bottles is impossible. He is only able to carry one at a time, making his journeys back and forth endless.

7

Crow rides a pale horse  
into a crowded powwow  
but none of the Indian panic.  
Damn, says Crow, I guess

they already live near the end of the world. In the final section of the poem Alexie brings the narrative to a close by referencing the end times as portrayed in Revelations. Crow rides into a “crowded powwow” on a “pale horse.”

In the scene Crow has come to represent death itself. In Revelations, during the coming of the four horsemen, one rides a pale horse. This rider is Death who now finds himself within the body of a Crow. While in other circumstances this entrance would be shocking to all who observed it, in this case “none of the Indian panic.”

None of the attendees are shocked to see this rider on his pale horse, it is as if they all knew what was coming and had learned to expect it a long time ago. Perhaps, as long ago as the days of Cain and Abel when Crow first understood his destiny.

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#### **4.4 ALEXIE SHERMAN: EVOLUTION**

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Poem Evolution

Buffalo Bill opens a pawn shop on the reservation  
right across the border from the liquor store  
and he stays open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

and the Indians come running in with jewelry  
television sets, a VCR, a full-length beaded buckskin outfit  
It took Inez Muse 12 years to finish. Buffalo Bill

takes everything the Indians have to offer, keeps it  
all catalogues and filed in a storage room. The Indians  
pawn their hands, saving the thumbs for last, they pawn

their skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin  
and when the last Indian has pawned everything

but his heart, Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks

closes up the pawn shop, paints a new sign over the old  
calls his venture THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES  
charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter.

The systematic oppression of the Native American People

*Evolution* is a powerful poem in which Sherman Alexie illustrates the systematic degradation of the Native American people and their culture. A character in the poem, Buffalo Bill sets up a pawn shop along the border of a Native American reservation. This pawn shop was intentionally set up in right across a liquor store. Buffalo Bill manages to take many valuables from the Native Americans in exchange for some money that the Native American people will eventually spend on the liquor store. The Native American people pawn away so many things that they are left with nothing but their hearts which is eventually sold to Buffalo Bill. Once all has been taken from the Native American community Buffalo Bill renames the shop and makes it a museum for Native American culture. Ironically, he then charges the Native Americans five dollars a person to enter.

Alexie's use of Buffalo Bill is significant in that it embodies imagery and reactions from both White Americans and Native Americans. Buffalo Bill is a historically significant character in that he was known to help "civilize the west". He was prominent in that sense. However, in this poem Sherman uses Buffalo Bill as a symbol that embodies America namely the American government and white people, in their ideals and most importantly in their actions. Through this poem, Alexie manages to create an extended metaphor that highlights the deceit that the American government played against the Native American community and the subsequent usurpation of land, identity, and self that they had to endure. Although this poem is written in a historical light, what occurred in the Native American community is still affecting them to this day. Indeed the Native American people are still suffering from the Buffalo Bills of today, also known as the American government, its oppressing laws and people. Native Americans are in a current oppressed state because they have had their land, their culture /traditions, and most importantly their sense of self (identity) systematically taken away from them.

It is a well-known fact that the Native American people had their land taken away from them by the European settlers that came here in the 17th century. It's a tale that many children hear in their history classes. But what many of them don't know (and what the American government is not teaching) is the way in which their lands have been taken away. There is no doubt that there have been some violent struggles for land between Native Americans and the European settlers but what is not shown is how mainly trickery (not violence) was used to steal their lands from them. The main trick that was used to get Native Americans to sign off their lands to the Europeans was the act of introducing alcohol. The Europeans knew about alcohol's ability to create addiction, intoxication, and impair a person's mind. So they used this as a tool to take away the valuables that Native Americans owned. Alexie illustrates this point when he writes the story of how "Buffalo Bill opens up a pawn shop on the reservation right across the border from the liquor store". Buffalo Bill knows that the Native American can't resist alcohol and systematically sets up a shop right across a liquor store so that the Native American people will feel tempted to go to the liquor stores after pawning their "jewelry, Television sets, VCR[s], and beaded buckskin outfits." He manages to make money from them "taking everything [they] have to offer" but we don't see how the Native American people benefit from this. Another thing worth noting is that Buffalo Bill "stays open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week". Alexie is showing how those who are plotting against the

Native Americans don't take a break, they seek to gain profit in any way they could at any time of the day.

Little by little the Native Americans begin to lose all they have. A dynamic shift can be seen in what the Native American people begin to pawn to Buffalo Bill. They start off with pawning material goods such as jewelry and electronics. This is symbolizing the land that was given to the American Government. But then we begin to see how artifacts of their culture are pawned away. Once all of the material belongings have been given away, Alexie shows the Native Americans pawning their "pawn their hands, saving the thumbs for last ...their skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin". The Native American people begin to sell their body parts, but it doesn't stop there. When everything, including their physical bodies have been lost "the last Indian pawn[s] everything but his heart, [and] Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks". This is showing how after the Native Americans lost everything to the American government they ended up giving up their "hearts". Heart," here can be read as a core of the Native American identity. )The fact that the Buffalo Bill put a monetary value on the "heart" of Native Americans shows the lack of respect the American Government had for Native Americans as a people. To the American Government the identity of Native Americans was an item that they sought to profit from. We can still see this today.

Many aspects of the Native American culture are in-authentically displayed by Americans today. We can see this in movies, such as Disney's *Pocahontas*, in which a young Native American woman falls in love with a European settler. Although Pocahontas was an actual person in history the story of her falling in love with John Smith is a complete fabrication that John Smith (one of the European Settlers) made up himself.

In addition, there are Native American themed festivals and ceremonies that are run by whites in an effort to show "appreciation" and gain an "understanding" of the Native American culture when in reality this is nothing but an insult to the Native American culture. This is briefly discussed in the novel *Ceremony* by Leslie Silko, in which the mayor in the city of Gallup organizes a yearly Gallup Ceremonial in which Native American dancers (from different tribes) come and perform.

Also the issue of the term "Redskins" has come to light in recent news. Redskins is a derogatory term that the Native American community as a whole agrees on. Yet, the football team named after this term defends its name and says its name is an honor to the Native American tribesmen. The American people can't seem to fathom that there are some things Native American culture that they don't understand and that some things are downright offensive. Their insistence that they are honoring the Native American culture and that they are trying to show respect is a form of denial. Denial that there stripped these people of everything they had and are now slowly taking away their true identity.

These inaccurate representations of Native American culture portrayed in books, the media, and festivals creates an identity crisis in the Native American community in that they are not given a say in what their true heritage really is. This is an unusual but powerful form of oppression. The media and the government is the current driving force of the oppression and silencing of the Native American people. It is the modern day Buffalo Bill and although it's not clear what measures should be taken to put an end to this, it is necessary for the Native American to reclaim their identity and show the world who they truly are.

Pawn shops tend to represent sites of unorganized accumulation, places that gather anything and everything with the prospect of profiting from the vulnerability of others.

By enticing patrons with quick cash--an instantaneous materialization of value--the pawn shop successfully confiscates living objects only to deprive them of meaning by re-offering them for sale. Sherman Alexie adapts this story poignantly in "Evolution." Alexie centers the enterprise of objectification in the figure of Buffalo Bill. Also known as William F. Cody (1846-1917), Buffalo Bill, no longer just an historical figure but rather an icon now synonymous with the American West, did at least his share in exploiting Native Americans. An honorary website credits him with helping "his West to make the transition from a wild past to a progressive future." The establishment of a binary between "wild" and "progressive" subjugates Indians by placing them in the role of savages, a representation that American history has repeatedly thrust upon them. Despite supposedly championing the rights of Indians, Buffalo Bill certainly contributed to their cultural confinement in his "Wild West" shows, performances that "contained elements of the circus, the drama of the times, and the rodeo," offering a "unique form of theatrical entertainment. The Wild West Show had as its theoretical aim the presentation of a pageant of the settling and the taming of the West" (Kramer 87). Beyond mere amusement, the shows also served as advertising campaigns to lure settlers to the West to help further tame the "uncivilized" region:

The Wild West show was inaugurated in Omaha in 1883 with real cowboys and real Indians portraying the "real West." The show spent ten of its thirty years in Europe. In 1887 Buffalo Bill was a feature attraction at Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. At the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, only Egypt's gyrations rivaled the Wild West as the talk of Chicago. By the turn of the century, Buffalo Bill was probably the most famous and most recognizable man in the world. (American West)

Given the legendary status history has accorded him, Buffalo Bill may be compared to other colonizing heroes in Western culture, especially those who circulated a dominant ideology as their role in enhancing domination. His ability to disseminate representations stems not only from his ubiquitous stage presence but also from the extensive publicity that presented his image. "Certainly no individual, before the days of movies and radio, ever had such effective personal exploitation. For nearly half a century he was continuously held before the public, in the pages of nickel and dime novels, on the boards in blood and thunder melodrama and in that astounding Wild West Show which toured from the tank towns to the very thrones of Europe" (Walsh 18). The title of a 1928 book, *The Making of Buffalo Bill: A Study in Heroics*, suggests that the phenomenon of Buffalo Bill was as much created by an eager audience as it was by Bill Cody. Its collective gaze, like the gaze performed by museum-goers, constructed an impervious ideal: "When they gazed upon the man himself they saw that he looked the part of hero" (Walsh 17). Empowered with the iconic eminence of a hero, Buffalo Bill possesses the capacity and authority to reproduce and distribute cultural myths. His conception of the "real West" extends from his imaginary relation to American ideals that have themselves been formed by such hegemonic historical representations as Manifest Destiny. The posters advertising Buffalo Bill contribute to the representational subjugation of Indians, portraying them as features of a crude land that the military must rehabilitate and civilize.

The illustration depicts Buffalo Bill and his entourage riding in a "civilized" wagon through a tumultuous landscape. As the central focus, they marginalize the Indians on the borders of the painting, indeed cutting some of them off as they forcibly split the factions on both sides of their procession. The white riders stand taller than the encroaching Indians, a force that the advertisement construes as a threat to American progress. Such a hazard, the painting declares, must be vanquished by the collective gaze of American discourse, a gaze that restricts Native American culture to a territory of enclosure.

In "Evolution," Alexie addresses the compartmentalization and commodification of culture by supplanting Buffalo Bill's stage antics with a business venture:

Buffalo Bill opens up a pawn shop on the reservation Right across the border from the liquor store and he stays open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and the Indians come running in with jewelry, Television sets, a VCR, a full-length beaded buckskin outfit it took Inez Muse 12 years to finish. (1-6)

Alexie re-appropriates history to fit the mold of a "24 hours a day, 7 days a week" contemporaneity. Placing it across the "border," rather than across the street from the liquor store, Alexie reminds us of the laws forbidding the sale of alcohol on many Indian reservations and the physical and cultural boundaries that continue to encircle them. The liquor store further calls attention to the use of alcohol as a device of suppression. Numerous historical accounts tell of white residents getting Indians drunk as a negotiation strategy to convince them to sign treaties that would yield land (Barr 7). The high rate of alcoholism that persists among Native Americans occupies a prominent position throughout all of Alexie's work. In "Evolution," Alexie intimates that the money the Indians obtain from pawning themselves evaporates when they cross the street to purchase liquor. This vicious cycle in which everyone stands to profit from Indians except Indians themselves sustains itself because "Buffalo Bill / takes everything the Indians have to offer, keeps it / all catalogued and filed in a storage room" (6-8). Buffalo Bill scavenges all he can, classifying it with the commodifying gaze of a museum curator. The cycle culminates in Buffalo Bill's move from collecting to exhibition:

and when the last Indian has pawned everything but his heart, Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks closes up the pawn shop, paints a new sign over the old calls his venture THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter. (11-15)

By seizing the "heart" of the last Indian and subsequently closing the doors of the pawn shop, Buffalo Bill seals out the possibility of repossession. This act deprives the culture of its lifeblood. The new museum freezes "NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES" in place, on display, behind glass cases. The painted over sign recalls the years of government manipulation of Indians in which new treaties invalidated old ones that the U.S. no longer wished to honor. The glossing over of old wounds and forms of cultural exploitation--feeding a people someone else's idea of what they should be--cap this poem with the absurd reality of a perverse history.

Jane Tompkins comments on the manifestation of another absurd reality in her visit to a museum in Cody, Wyoming that enshrines Buffalo Bill himself. The existence of this memorial ironically shifts the position of the celebrated pioneer from curator to spectacle. However, unlike the cultural deprivation enacted by the museum of Alexie's poem, the Buffalo Bill Museum petrifies the superhero status of its namesake. Both instances cast a type of paralysis--The Museum of Native American Cultures frames its objects as an exhibition of a primitive culture, a display of dry bones; The Buffalo Bill Museum, as Tompkins tells us, galvanized the golden image of an American icon:

The Buffalo Bill Museum envelops you in an array of textures, colors, shapes, sizes, forms. The fuzzy brown bulk of a buffalo's hump, the sparkling diamonds in a stickpin, the brilliant colors of the posters--there's something about the cacophonous mixture that makes you want to walk in and be surrounded by it, as if you were going into a child's adventure story. It all appeals to the desire to be transported, to pretend for a little while that we're cowboys or cowgirls; it's a museum where fantasy can take over. In this respect, it is true to the character of Buffalo Bill's life. (Tompkins 530)

The fantasy of Buffalo Bill's life is the fantasy projected onto it by the gaze of a hungry audience. For years Americans and viewers around the world stood captivated by the Wild West Show, feeding off its depictions of conquest, control, and violence. Tompkins gives us the severe yet appropriate metaphor that "museums are a form of cannibalism made safe for polite society," serving as venues that "cater to the urge to absorb the life of another into one's own life" (533). This remark accords with an attitude Alexie voices throughout his work. The dominant culture devours its subordinates to sustain its stance as an enforcer. "The objects in museums preserve for us a source of life from which we need to nourish ourselves when the resources that would normally supply us have run dry" (Tompkins 533). The act of sapping resources from another culture again points to the narrative of "Evolution," a title that drips with the irony of the concept of civilization. A civilized culture, Alexie implies, must "evolve" enough to perfect the practice of stealing and plundering other cultures for the purpose of presenting them as uncivilized behind the glass case of the museum. We too, Tompkins reminds us, are onlookers. "We stand beside the bones and skins and hooves of beings that were once alive, or stare fixedly at their painted images. Indeed our visit is only a safer form of the same enterprise" (533) rehearsed by Buffalo Bill's Wild West show--cultural objectification and destruction.

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## 4.5 MAJOR THEMES AND ASPECTS OF STUDY

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"Evolution" features the American capitalist culture and the social Darwinism used by European settlers in the form of "ethnic cleansing". This word implies – to wipe off the unfitted group of people from the face of Earth by the act of killing or marginalizing them. There is "Buffalo Bill" who opens a pawn shop in the Reservation and exploits Native Americans, by giving them less money in return for their goods. After he has drained them out of their goods, he opens a museum with their stuff and charges 5 bucks per head to let them see their own stuff (dark comedy).

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## 4.6 LET US SUM UP

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Alexi Sherman brings up new and diverse issues and themes through his literary works in American literature. Out of the two poems, *Crow Testament* by Sherman Alexie speaks on the hardships of Native Americans through its seven sections. You must have noticed that each of these sections is divided into shorter stanzas that range from one to four lines. The poem has no regulated rhyme scheme, but it does follow a specific pattern of words. The poem *Crow Testament* uses 'crow' to stand in as a symbol for the Native populations of the Americas and Alexie takes the reader through varying symbols representing the white settlers, and the present white majority of America. Likewise, *Evolution* is equally a powerful poem in which Sherman Alexie illustrates the systematic degradation of the Native American people and their culture. In this poem. Alexie addresses the compartmentalization and commodification of culture by supplanting Buffalo Bill's stage antics with a business venture. It is expected that you must have grasped the themes and issues that the poet has tried to underline and emphasise.

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## 4.7 EXERCISES

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1. What are the chief images and symbols used in the poem?
2. What is the central idea(s) of the poem?
3. Do you think that Alexie Sherman demonstrated a social vision through his poem?

Comment on.



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## 4.8 FURTHER READINGS

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